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ABSTRACT

A survey is presented of modern language teaching in Great Britain since the establishment of their Modern Language Association in 1893, with particular emphasis on developments during the past 20 years. The following topics are addressed: the influence of linguistic research on methodology, the situation in higher education and the schools, changing patterns in teacher education, and the reasons for teaching foreign languages in Britain. In universities, departments of linguistics and area studies were created and research centers were established. A revision of goals, content and methodology in primary and secondary education was necessitated by the decision in the early sixties to offer all secondary pupils equal access to education. Observations are made on different kinds of programs to meet student needs and on the optimum age for beginning foreign language study. In conclusion, it is noted that the value of foreign language study on all levels has been recognized although no clear working definition of aims and objectives for various ability levels has yet been achieved. (AMH)

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Teaching foreign languages in Great Britain - why?

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This paper is an edited version of a talk given by S R Ingram (Honorary Secretary, Modern Language Association) at the 12th International Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes on 28 November, 1975 in Washington, D.C.

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Teaching foreign languages in Great Britain—why?

The Modern Language Association of Great Britain was founded in 1893. Throughout its whole life it has fought to establish a rightful place in the curriculum for modern languages, defined in its prospectus as 'living languages and civilisations as subjects of study'. One of the first actions of the MLA was to petition the universities to institute an honours degree in modern languages, for its founders knew that they held a lowly place in academic esteem at that time and their status in schools inevitably reflected this. In 1894 only one per cent of children aged sixteen or over were in school at all, and these were in endowed or independent schools with curricula linked closely to university requirements. The Education Act of 1902 enabled local authorities to establish maintained schools, but these tended to copy the curriculum of the independent schools in which classics and mathematics were considered the most suitable studies for those who wanted to succeed in life. From the start, modern languages had to face prejudice and opposition. Looking back, a report published in 1918 described the situation: . . . in the great and wealthy schools the Modern Sides which came into being were regarded too often both by masters and by boys as the refuge of the intellectually destitute. The course on the Modern Side had no imaginative aim; nor had it any clear and well defined outlook. . . the modern language teaching followed too closely methods devised for the teaching of dead languages. . . there was little attempt to make modern literary studies the basis of a discipline and of ordered information equivalent to those supplied by the classical training. The Modern Sides received no stimulus from public rewards and no serious backing from public opinion.' After paying tribute to the influence of the MLA, it then stated: 'It remains. . . above all, to convince the public of the practical and intellectual value of living languages and of all the knowledge to which they are the avenue.'[1]

Fortunately there were pioneers who wanted languages taught in a way different from the classics. People working under the influence of Sweet, Passy and Vietor advocated the 'natural' or the 'reformed' or the 'direct' methods. From the start they emphasised the importance of the spoken language, often with the use of the international phonetic alphabet, which had been perfected about 1900. They also believed in the inductive learning of grammar as distinguished from treating it as a discipline. But there was still an examination to be taken at the end of the course, and preparation for this often diverted the teaching to a written translation test which itself affected the curriculum and the teaching method. Between the two wars what was known as the 'reading' method was developed, particularly in the United States, and the thirties saw much work on word frequency which could be applied to teaching materials. After the second war there was an uneasy period when we were all feeling our way towards a radically new approach.

I have seen this development in my own lifetime. I was at school in the 1920s, taught by teachers who had been trained in the nineteenth century tradition. I do not remember using spoken French or German at all in the classroom. We were very good indeed at the subjunctive mood, and I can repeat to this day the list of verbs in French which take *être* in the perfect tense in the order in which I

learned them then. I can repeat the German prepositions and the cases they take. This was in itself no bad thing for those who were intellectually inclined and who were later to use languages in an academic context. I went on to the university in the thirties, spent a year in Germany and two shorter periods in France, then went on to the training college for teachers. I then taught for three years before the war, went away for five and a half years of service in the Army, and returned to the classroom to teach by methods which still reflected the ideas of my own teachers, who had themselves been at school before the first war.

The last twenty years have seen many changes. Many modern language teachers felt uneasy when they considered the results of their efforts. I can remember that even the highly intelligent children whom we were teaching in the grammar schools twenty years ago could not communicate when they went abroad. Our methods were too intellectual and examination-orientated. But new ideas were in the air. We began to hear about people who studied linguistics as part of language methodology, who encouraged us to look at our subject in a new way. We heard of verbal behaviour and Skinner; we heard of syntactic structures and Chomsky. (Like Chomsky we were sometimes dubious of the value of both to language teaching.) We heard that things were happening in France. Adults were being taught French at the NATO headquarters by the use of tape recorders and filmstrip projectors. CREDIF had been set up at St Cloud, and a new kind of word count had been made which resulted in *français fondamental.* New courses began to appear, calling themselves audio-visual and audio-lingual. I was involved in the use of one of the first of these in a grammar school in East London from 1958 onwards.

Universities and higher education

Let us look for a moment at what was happening in British universities. For a decade or more after 1945, linguistics made little advance in academic standing, though phonetics developed strongly. By 1960 the picture began to change rapidly. New universities were created, and their departments of languages and linguistics were often determined to be different. Some adopted an 'area studies' approach, with language seen in a socio-economic context. Others cultivated comparative literature, spanning a number of languages. Others again adopted a linguistic approach. Yet others took a practical approach to language learning, regarding languages generally as useful tools in other studies rather than as an end in themselves. This practical orientation was particularly true of the polytechnics, which had often been raised to university status from their former position as colleges of advanced technology. A new degree-awarding body, the Council for National Academic Awards, was set up, which has validated a wide variety of degree schemes for combining languages with other studies, such as science and engineering, economics and business studies.

The years 1964 to 1970 saw the establishment of four new departments of linguistics and ten language centres in higher education. These, together with established departments, provided the structure for a remarkable development

in linguistic studies, first through subsidiary courses, then through combined or joint courses, and finally, in a few universities through degree courses in linguistics itself. Three new centres or research units dedicated to applied linguistics were set up in 1974.

Schools

Until about twenty years ago, there was a recognised pattern. The 1944 Education Act established a system of secondary education which provided grammar schools for about the top twenty-five per cent of pupils as the result of a selective examination at eleven. The remaining seventy-five per cent of pupils went mainly to secondary modern schools or to secondary technical schools. From the early sixties a whole series of changes began. For social and political, if not always for purely educational reasons, it was decided that all secondary pupils were to have access to a similar education, or were to have equal opportunities. The watchword was 'parity of esteem', and the new slogan was comprehensivisation. On the way to achieving this aim, many varieties of secondary schools have been developed, and local authorities have vied with each other to offer what they said the parents wanted. The examination at eleven plus has been largely abolished, and pupils are now transferred from primary schools at varying ages, either to middle schools at nine, ten or eleven, or to secondary schools which provide courses lasting three, four, five, six or seven more years. The school leaving age was raised to sixteen in 1973.

Now, the fact that all pupils were to have equal opportunities meant in practice that in their first year at least in the secondary school they were put into mixed-ability classes, and that banding or streaming was postponed for a time at least. Thus subjects such as modern languages now had to be offered to the whole ability range, which brought with it new problems of motivation, of discipline, and the urgent need for new methods and materials, to say nothing of changing needs in teacher training. Inevitably the examination at the end of the course affects the curriculum and classroom methods. Until 1963 there had been only one type of national certificate for children of sixteen plus—GCE 'O' level, originally designed to test selected pupils of grammar school calibre. In 1963 the new CSE examination was introduced for the 25 per cent below the GCE level.

What has this meant to the modern language teacher? For us who were trained to teach intellectually above-average children a very tricky problem arose. We had to face classes completely different, and whose motivation and difficulties we really did not understand. Coupled with these administrative, organisational and curricular problems came changed objectives for modern language teaching. There was to be more emphasis on the spoken word, and the prime objective was to be communication. New techniques and aids were on the way—audio-visual courses and language laboratories were with us. There was, too, a general movement away from class teaching towards individual learning. More than ever before we had to face the frightening criterion of the native speaker. He was always only

twenty miles away; he was now more accessible than ever before through the development of holiday traffic.

So it would seem that the comparatively comfortable pattern of twenty years ago has gone for ever. The clear-cut situation of beginning a foreign language with virgin soil with pupils at the age of eleven, and taking them steadily through an organised course to the age of sixteen, and in some cases to the age of eighteen, has been blurred at both ends of the age range.

Many pupils have begun to learn French before coming to the secondary school; at the other end of the scale we have a variety of other options, ranging from sixth form colleges through various further education establishments to technical colleges, polytechnics and universities.

The modern language teacher in secondary schools now has to teach children of a much wider range of ability than ever before. He may have completely new problems in the attitude of his pupils to modern languages—for some who have had experience of French may now be bored with them.

The primary school French pilot scheme has been studied and reported on in great detail by the National Foundation for Educational Research.[2] Among the main conclusions are the following: there are no indications of an optimum age for learning a foreign language; there is no evidence to suggest that younger children are more efficient than older children at acquiring foreign language skill—if anything, the reverse seems to be true; the sheer amount of time spent learning a foreign language appears to be the dominant factor affecting success, not the age at which learning began. (This tallies with findings on the teaching of French as a foreign language in eight countries.)[3] Further points are made: the consistently superior performance of girls; the association between socio-economic status and achievement; the consistently superior performance of pupils in small rural schools; the different patterns of achievement in oral and written skills; the use and abuse of the tape recorder; the preference of high-achieving pupils for a traditional text-book approach and their resistance to audio-visual materials; the attitude of the head of the school towards the teaching of French exerting a real influence on pupils' level of achievement; and finally, but by no means least, early experience of success affecting later achievement in French and later attitudes towards learning languages, to a far greater extent than earlier attitudes affected later behaviour.

However, it has also been urged that the most important problems (eg prevention of failure) are not connected with age; a similar enquiry into other school subjects might have produced similar results and questions; the greatest criticism to be lodged against language teachers might be that, whilst objectives in other disciplines have been identified, those for the teaching of languages have hitherto remained unclear.

A real disappointment that was felt over the primary French experiment was that languages other than French suffered. It had been hoped that when the primary

children came to the secondary school it would be known who were the good linguists and who would therefore be able to start a second foreign language, probably either German or Spanish. The facts turned out to be different in most cases. Because it was very unusual for every primary school in a district to offer the same French courses, pupils arrived at their secondary school with very different achievements. It was possible for one school intake to include pupils who had had three years of French, two years, one year or none at all. In some cases the pupils were put into sets and good results were obtained. But quite often teachers simply ignored previous knowledge of the language and started everybody again at the beginning, with the consequent boredom of some pupils and endless problems of class discipline. A further unfortunate consequence was that it was found difficult, if not impossible, to begin a second language for at least a year or two.

There have been disappointments of another kind. We have not yet created teaching materials suitable for all children, but we still tend to test all of them by the kind of examination which was derived from experience with selected children. There are however signs of new thinking which will help the less able pupils. In the comprehensive school the general aims of education have become more concerned with the development and fulfilment of the individual, and serious attempts are being made to provide pupils with a range of choices. Most schools feel that no secondary pupil should be deprived of the opportunity of learning a modern language. Most people also think that it is unwise that a pupil should be compelled to continue a modern language, say in the third and fourth years of the secondary school, against his inclinations and despite past failure in the subject.

We are now beginning to discuss the possibility of not attempting a linear course for weaker pupils, but of concentrating on a situationally-based one, to which as much material can be added as the pupils can take. For many pupils it is manifestly crazy to insist on learning all the irregular verbs in the present tense before introducing either the past tense or the future. I feel that we have so often allowed ourselves to become the slaves of some theoretical total grammar which was a survival of nineteenth century classical learning by selected pupils. At the same time as we put less emphasis on the linear nature of our course, we must emphasise the receptive skills as opposed to the productive skills. All that a large number of our pupils will ever need is an ability to understand the spoken language in limited situations, a small capacity to speak it in these situations, and some competence in reading a limited range of material. Coupled with this, there has been a lot of discussion about so-called *European Studies*. Of course, good teachers have always included a sizable element of background information about the country whose language they were teaching. Now, the farther we go down the ability range, the more teachers tend to rely on this background element to provide the pupil with useful activities, although they try to retain a core of language. Defining what this core must be requires care; and of course Europe is not only France.

Many more pupils in the top half of the ability range now move on to some

form of further or higher education. A growing number are leaving comprehensive, grammar and independent schools voluntarily in order to enrol in examination courses at colleges of further education. It has been claimed that, 'By 1973 a third of all 'A' level candidates were studying at further education establishments, and one sixth of all the home university entrants in that year were recruited from further education'.[4] Students themselves give the reasons for this as twofold: they are able to follow a different combination of subjects from that available in secondary schools, and they like the more adult atmosphere of the further education college. Now, instead of the grammar school sixth form being the only route to more advanced work, we have 75 sixth form colleges which tend to concentrate on academic courses, and an increasing number of colleges (comprehensive colleges, if you like) in which academic streams do not predominate.

Teacher-training

Historically, the British education system has recognised two types of teacher, trained in different ways. The first is composed of university graduates who have decided to become teachers. They have therefore taken a post-graduate certificate course normally lasting one year, after which they are recognised by the Department of Education and Science as qualified teachers. They have gone on to teach, usually in selective secondary schools, and their teaching until very recently has been confined to the specialist subjects in which they took their degrees. The second consisted of those who went through colleges of education. These entered training direct from school at the age of eighteen plus, followed a course lasting three years, in which training for teaching was carried out alongside academic courses in the students' specialist subject. At the end the student was, like his graduate counterpart, recognised as a qualified teacher. By the mid sixties it became possible for selected students of a three year course to do one further year of study to obtain the degree of Bachelor of Education.

Formerly nearly all modern language teachers came from universities, now a number of teachers of French come from colleges of education.

The first year of a teacher's employment in a school is always a probationary period; his status as a qualified teacher has to be confirmed by his employing authority as a result of his work during this year. This has given local authorities an opportunity to add to the professional training of young teachers they employ, offering them courses, seminars and help from professional advisers. In-service courses are organised from several sources. The Department of Education and Science runs short residential courses, a few of them abroad. The Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges has a scheme for language teachers to exchange posts with colleagues in schools abroad. The teacher concerned receives his normal salary plus certain expenses and a cost-of-living allowance, and spends one term or one year in the foreign school or college. The Central Bureau also operates the scheme for foreign assistants. Some 4,500 of these are at present in British schools and colleges, and some 2,000 British students are abroad under similar exchange conditions.

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Many other organisations and institutions now help pupils, students and teachers of modern languages, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, the many teachers' centres and local resource centres which have been set up by LEAs and the professional associations run by teachers themselves, such as the MLA.

Why do we teach modern languages in Britain?

According to official pronouncements, the general aims of modern language teaching in secondary schools in Britain over the last hundred years or so appear superficially to have been remarkably stable. But if they do not seem to have changed much, it is quite another question as to whether they were ever internally consistent or could remain so in an educational system which has expanded and developed from being socially selective to one which became first competitive and meritocratic and now bids to be comprehensive and non-selective. There has been throughout a dichotomy of aim, perhaps an inherent self-contradiction which has never been properly resolved between languages as an intellectual discipline and as a vocational study. In Britain we suffer from having a world language as our native language; the vocational demands made on us for the use of foreign languages were always limited, and perhaps made us lazy about learning them. We have got away with talking English in our commercial and diplomatic transactions. In the educational field, when we have talked about *language* as distinct from learning a foreign language, we have often meant proficiency in using English. And, although it has frequently been claimed that learning foreign languages contributes to some general language ability manifested in the use of English, there has been in Britain no real co-ordination or even link between the theory and methodology of mother-tongue teaching and foreign language teaching.

As long ago as 1868, the Taunton report, which dealt with endowed secondary schools, stated: 'There can be no doubt that a boy gains very much in the study even of his own language by the study of another. A great deal of grammar which it is very hard to express to a learner becomes clear without any explanations at all in the mere act of learning a foreign language. All masters appeared to be agreed that nothing teaches English grammar so easily or so well as Latin, and next to that, they would place the teaching of some other foreign grammar, such as French. . . The great argument on which French can at present be recommended in preference to Latin is its practical utility. German has at present, in most parts of England in a less degree than French, become of practical utility; but in another respect it must be ranked higher, for its numerous inflections are peculiarly adapted for teaching grammar; and for that purpose it would stand next to Latin'.[5]

The Bryce report of 1895 preparing the way for maintained secondary schools, noted that 'the classical languages are taught more than ever. . . and they do not now stand alone; a place and a function has been found for modern languages and literatures'. But it went on to say that secondary education should be 'a process of intellectual training and personal discipline conducted with special

regard to the profession or trade to be followed'.[6] This clearly could have had effects on modern language teaching, although in fact the opportunity to relate modern languages to practical as distinct from academic aims was not exploited. The universities still demanded Latin first and foremost and Britain was still insular in thought as well as fact.

The first statement of curricular aims, as distinct from the educational value, of modern language teaching in the new maintained secondary schools came in 1906: 'Boys who have completed a (secondary) course should be expected: (a) to understand, within a vocabulary of reasonable scope, clearly enunciated French speech; (b) to express themselves readily and correctly, within similar limits, in both spoken and written French; (c) to read with ease and intelligence French prose or verse of ordinary difficulty, and to possess a first-hand acquaintance with some at least of the prose and verse masterpieces of French literature'.[7]

These aims, with elegant variations (and applied to all modern languages) were to recur constantly during the next 50 or 60 years. They could have been written yesterday. They were restated by the Board of Education in 1912[8] and reprinted unchanged for general circulation in 1925.

In the report c 1918 it was noted that 'sound instruction in English is the best foundation for successful study of other languages' but 'priority should be given to learning one foreign language well rather than two poorly. . . Those who after a full trial fail to show progress. . . should abandon the study of foreign languages. . . Those unable to attain the active use of a language may, nevertheless, learn to read one intelligently and fluently. . . It appears far from certain that the early beginning of foreign languages in schools is advantageous to their study or to education in general'.[9] (A view we can still debate with profit.)

A report of 1926 referred particularly to the increased university output of qualified staff, who nevertheless tended to take back into schools some of the ideas which they had acquired at the university, for this report also noted that many schools now spent too much time attempting to teach written French at the expense of progress in other skills, notably reading: 'Again and again whole blocks of forms, though quite capable of making adequate progress, are prevented by the incubus of external examinations from making any progress in any direction whatever.'[10] The universities set the style of the external examinations.

A pamphlet of 1929 referred specifically to the four skills in defining a standard of attainment at age sixteen to be achieved and examined after five years: '(1) ability to read at sight simple modern French prose (2) ability to follow and understand French. . . as it is spoken deliberately and clearly by an educated French person (3) ability to write simple French with reasonable correctness (4) ability to reproduce French sounds exactly, to read aloud intelligibly. . . to frame and pronounce French sentences.'[11] Recommendations included making the oral examination compulsory.

Not much changed until about 1960. In the last fifteen years members of associations such as the MLA have been discussing topics based on questions such as *Why? What? How? When?* and *To whom?* We have been trying to decide what may be the distinctive contribution of a foreign language to the education of the secondary school pupil, and we feel that it is 'a sense of direct contact through the language with the people and culture of another country. . . This can foster attitudes of curiosity, tolerance and understanding of the foreign, the unfamiliar and the unusual in speech, customs and manners; enthusiasm for making contact with people from and in other countries; and even a genuine love of the spoken word for its own sake.' However, what we have not yet achieved is a clear working definition of aims and objectives for the various ability-levels. It is clear that the teaching of children of lower ability demands special teaching skills. Such children should be taught by teachers who are genuinely interested in their progress and able to give considerable time to the preparation of suitable material. We have constantly to remind ourselves that our pupils' physiological, emotional and social development may proceed far more quickly than their mastery of linguistic skills. In our new understanding of what we mean by communication, we might well base our teaching of the less able on the assumption that when those pupils speak with a Frenchman (if ever), they will speak English and the Frenchman will also speak his own language. This does not down-grade the subject—it only shifts the emphasis. At another level this is what already happens at international conferences. All in all, our subject contributes towards the education of the child for life as a citizen, a worker and an individual in a changing world: a world where the principal need is often more for understanding than for expression.

During the last ten years the Modern Language Association has published books of varying lengths on topics such as: modern languages in the universities, modern languages in the sixth form, modern language examinations, oral examining in French, tools for the job and modern languages and careers. But I wonder whether we have really been asking the right question. Not perhaps just *How? When? Where?* and *To whom?* according to fixed notions of our aims: ought we not to ask *What is wrong with us as teachers?*

Our colleagues in Australia may have exaggerated the problem but an editorial in their journal pointed out: 'Essentially teachers are slow to change and conservative in outlook. We are afraid of change because it will de-skill us, it will jerk the rug from under our feet. We are frightened of taking a long hard look at how and why we are what we are, of admitting we have failed. We have failed to discover what our students' needs and skills are, where their interests lie; we have failed to interest and motivate them. Above all, we have made little effort to tackle the parents and to educate *them,* to explain and demonstrate to them what we are trying to do and why. Many of us care so little that we are not even members of our own subject association.'[12]

Perhaps the in-built conservatism of education is most noticeable in modern languages, for undoubtedly we have not taken account of certain changes. In the past, many language teachers, because of the administrative convenience and the

fact that there was to be an examination at the end of the course, have tended to make the great bulk of the pupils proceed by the same path. How much better it would be if more teachers persuaded their pupils that examinations are hurdles to take in their stride, and not a high jump where they win because everybody else fails. There are those who would abolish all examinations, because by definition a proportion of children must fail. I do not believe that the right kind of examination ever did any pupil any harm, and the competitive spirit is not to be decried. Indeed we may have gone too far in making things easy for a great many pupils. Most children welcome the chance to show what they can do, and some form of continuous assessment and use of a profile system may well be the answer in the long run.

'Motivation' and 'attitude' are constantly on the lips of educationists. The present aim, 'communication', is often not reflected in what actually goes on in the classroom. Many of the activities we indulge in are really only a *preparation* for language use and do not make the pupils engage in it. The attitude of the children is closely linked with that of their parents, although they might want to deny this. Achievement is likely to be highest where social attitudes and teaching together combine to promote effective learning, and lowest where attitudes are negative and the teaching is weak. It is the teacher's skill and personality which create the conditions for learning; the home creates pre-conditions. In Britain we have not yet developed suitable materials for the less able pupil, the methodology to help him to learn, ways of assessing his progress or of training his teachers. Our most urgent need is now for some form of stability for the teacher and his task, and this will probably best be provided by devising clearly differentiated courses with realistic aims for the whole range of pupils the teachers now face in the classrooms. As secondary teachers we have often been accused (sometimes justly) that we are teachers of subjects and not teachers of children. We must remind ourselves that what is learned is much more important than what we try to teach. We talk about the survival value of languages; as educators, and that is what we all are first and foremost, we must remember that the aim of all schooling is the self-reliance of the pupil. What he carries away from school is an attitude to the problems of real life which he will encounter. We have to learn to get on with each other, and it sometimes seems that we are not very good at it. We have to help our pupils to become persons—persons who in a multi-national world will somehow learn to tolerate each other, and perhaps work together. We are in a better position than many of our colleagues to do this by introducing our pupils to differences of language, attitudes and the way of life of other nations. Foreign languages should not be taught 'for their own sake', but to further other worthwhile activities. In this respect aims have never changed but the means by which we achieve them must constantly be reviewed.

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